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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 001559

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM MARR LI NI

SUBJECT: PUBLIC REACTION TO TAYLOR ASYLUM AND LIBERIA
DEPLOYMENT

CLASSIFIED BY DCM RICK ROBERTS FOR REASONS 1.5 (b) AND (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (U) The Nigerian press headlined President Bush's recent commendation of President Obasanjo's efforts in Liberia, and the Nigerian President, received a heroic welcome in Liberia early this week. Nevertheless, Obasanjo is still facing criticism at home for granting political asylum to Charles Taylor and deploying Nigerian troops to Liberia. End summary.

President Bush's Commendation Letter

¶12. (C) The President's letter to Obasanjo was front-page news in most Nigerian newspapers on September 1) even those usually critical of U.S. foreign policy. Subsequent publications did not carry any comments, positive or negative, on the letter. Most Nigerians have focused instead on domestic criticism of Obasanjo.

NIGERIANS CRITICIZE ASYLUM FOR TAYLOR

¶13. (U) The Nigerian Union of Journalists has threatened to file a legal action against Taylor for the death of two Nigerian journalists, allegedly killed on Taylor's orders in 1990. One local writer described Nigeria as the "new haven of Hitlers of Africa" and accused President of Obasanjo for being insensitive to prevailing local opinion.

¶15. (U) General Victor Malu, former Nigerian Chief of Army Staff and former Commander of ECOMOG was furious: "Charles Taylor has been responsible for the death of so many Nigerians, to say that Nigeria, of all the countries in West Africa is the one granting him asylum is the greatest insult to Nigerians, and whoever took that decision does not have the interest of this country", Malu told an influential local newspaper last month.

¶16. (U) Tom Ikimi, politician and former Nigerian foreign minister described as "dangerous" the granting of asylum and deploying Nigerian soldiers. Ikimi told a recent press conference in Abuja that "Nigeria may be the strongest nation in West Africa, it is today weaving its way through a maze of complications all in the quest for solutions to a range of fundamental problems at home. That is why no matter the justification for the more than \$4 billion so far expended on Liberia, the ordinary Nigerian would find it difficult to understand why in addition to the further costs that are bound to follow we should bear the burden of looking after a character like Charles Taylor."

¶17. (U) House Committee Chair on Appropriations Gabriel Suswan criticized President Obasanjo of spending money on Liberia without approval from the House. The Daily Trust alleged that the current Liberian initiative has already cost Nigeria more than 65 million dollars.

COMENT

¶18. (C) While President Obasanjo is receiving accolades and recognition from the international community for his peace efforts in Liberia and other international engagements, his popularity at home is under attack due to hard harsh

economic conditions and insecurity. His critics on those issues also attack him on Liberia for good measure.
MEECE